

The Pony Express



1860-1861

WESTWARD EXPANSION



The Pony Express

1860-1861

Fastest Run in the West

Out of the summer haze bursts a horse and rider, swiftly approaching a lonely sod building on the prairie. Arriving in a cloud of dust, the rider leaps from his horse and heads for a water barrel to quench his thirst. Meanwhile, a leather sack filled with mail is whisked off the tired horse and thrown over the saddle of a fresh mount. Within two minutes, the rider is gone, galloping toward the far horizon.

This young man in a hurry was one of some 200 Pony Express riders who carried the mail in a giant relay between St. Joseph, Missouri, and Sacramento, California, a distance of 1,966 miles, in ten days or less. Changing horses every ten to fifteen miles at swing stations, and switching riders at home stations after a run of 75 miles or more, the riders averaged 250 miles a day. During the short time the Pony Express was in operation—from April 1860, through October, 1861—its riders defied hostile Indians, blazing desert heat, and bone-chilling blizzards to travel a total of 650,000 miles with 34,753 pieces of mail. To save weight the letters they carried were written on tissue-thin paper as postage cost \$10 an ounce, later cut to \$2. The best time ever achieved was in March 1861, when Lincoln's inaugural address was carried from Missouri to California in seven days, 17 hours.

The Pony Express was organized by stagecoach operator William Hepburn Russell, who had been convinced by a group of prominent Californians that an overland mail route to their state was feasible. Russell's business partners opposed the venture because it was not protected by a U.S. mail contract. But Russell went ahead, building stations and purchasing 500 top-quality Indian horses. In advertising for riders, he hinted at the hazardous nature of the job by asking for "small, daring young men, preferably orphans." The riders received board and keep and were paid \$100 to \$150 a month. Their average age was 19, but one rider, David Jay, was 13, and William F. Cody, who became famous as "Buffalo Bill," was 15. In a further effort to save weight, a rider usually carried only a pistol and a knife. He was expected to out-run the Indians, not out-fight them.

The Pony Express days of glory ended abruptly in 1861 following completion of the transcontinental telegraph. Russell's firm lost more than \$200,000 in the venture, but the daring of the Pony Express riders caught the imagination of every American, and their exploits became an important part of the legend and lore of the nation.

Illustration: *Pony Express rider on his way after changing horses.*

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Illustration: *Buffalo Bill, one of the pony express riders, outdistances an Indian*